DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 068 499 TM 001 836

AUTHOR Hartman, Allan S.
TITLE Problems and Issues in Using Volunteer Researchers in Assisting Community and Citizens Groups: The Boston Experience.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 8p.; Presentation at symposium of AERA Annual Meeting, 1972

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Community Involvement; *Educational Improvement; *Educational Researchers; Program Evaluation; *Voluntary Agencies; *Volunteers
IDENTIFIERS *Boston Network for Better Education

ABSTRACT

The Boston Network for Better Education, with the primary aim of bringing together researchers and community groups seeking to improve schools, is described as to its approach in recruiting and utilizing volunteers. Volunteers were solicited from lists of educational researchers in the Boston metropolitan area, and an attempt was made to identify community groups who would be the recipients of the Network's efforts. Volunteers for International Technical Assistance (VITA) was given charge of the program after initial efforts by the Network had produced little in the way of desired results. The Network volunteers have been involved in assisting a community school in program development and in planning for after-hours use of the school; in providing information on preschool programs; and in assisting an inner-city parochial school with Title I negotiations. (DB)

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

ED 068499

TM 001 836

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES IN USING VOLUNTEER RESEARCHERS IN ASSISTING COMMUNITY AND CITIZENS GROUPS:

The Boston Experience

Symposium Presentation at the

1972 AERA Annual Meeting

Allan S. Hartman
Associate Director
Massachusetts Advisory
Council on Education
182 Tremont Street
Boston, MA 02111

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES IN USING VOLUNTEER
RESEARCHERS IN ASSISTING
COMMUNITY AND CITIZENS GROUPS:

THE BOSTON EXPERIENCE

Background — The Boston NETWORK FOR BETTER EDUCATION grew directly out of AERA's national effort to bring together researchers and community groups seeking to improve schools. This effort, formally launched at the February 1971 AERA annual meeting under the name of Research for Action, was primarily aimed at making community groups an important force for school change by providing them with technical counsel not ordinarily available to them. The counsel was to come from the volunteered expertise of Association members having competencies touching on the issues and needs of concern to these groups. Although initially the focus was to be on "low power, poorly funded groups outside the regular system", this requirement was soon dropped in favor of an outlook encouraging researchers to offer their services to any community group engaged in educational reform.

The 1971 Annual Meeting provided an initial orientation for potential coordinators and others interested in participating. However, although there were some extended discussions on how coordinators might go about their tasks "back home", most of those in attendance, including those responsible for national coordination of Research for Action, recognized that coordinators would have to be "self-starters", and that assistance from "headquarters central" would be limited. In short, each local was to be on its own.

Planning in Boston — With this background a group of five AERA members gathered together in Boston in late February, 1971. For some strange reason the number of the planning group always remained at about five right up until the last planning group meeting in October, 1971. However, these were not always the same five people and, probably, part of the reason for the failure of the Boston local to develop and "energize" more alternatives and to persist in its efforts was the fact that from the beginning there was not a continuing core of planners and workers. Turnover in the planning group left the major decisions, by default, to a group of two or three.

Nevertheless, by mid-April, 1971 the planning group had after three meetings agreed on the following particulars:

- to conduct a systematic canvas of all educational researchers in the Boston metropolitan area for

purposes of identifying people interested in volunteering their talents to local community groups. The canvas would draw from mailing lists supplied from AERA, Phi Delta Kappa and NCEM.

- to conduct a canvas of faculty members in various schools of education to identify those interested in working with their students in assisting local community groups.

- to identify local community groups to whom services and help would be offered and initial communications about the NETWORK sent.

- to identify a local agency willing to act as an initial clearinghouse and switchboard center for funneling community requests for services and help to NETWORK members.

- to identify other local agencies willing to assist in the establishment and maintenance of the NETWORK.

Recruiting Volunteers

The first step in recruiting volunteers was to obtain lists of educational researchers in the Boston metropolitan area. AERA provided a printout for the state from which those residing or working in the Boston metropolitan area were culled. The decision to keep geographically within the metropolitan area (some 72 communities) was in one sense arbitrary and, in another, dictated by the expectation that most of the groups wanting the NETWORK's assistance would be in the city of Boston which would make it difficult to use volunteers from the middle of the state.

The local chapter of Phi Delta Kappa also provided the NETWORK with their mailing list. A scrutiny of this list as well as that supplied by the National Council on Educational Measurement indicated:

- some overlapping membership;

- individuals who were not educational researchers but were drawn from the educational community at large.

The next step was the preparation of a mailing to all individuals on these lists. The mailing was to include a questionnaire (largely adopted from that used in the June 1970 Educational Researcher) and a brief memorandum explaining the purposes of the NETWORK, how it would operate, and encouraging researchers to complete and return the questionnaire.

With some 900 names and informal agreements among various individuals to have their institutions share in the mailing costs, a mass mailing was sent out in early May. By July the NETWORK had some 55 usable questionnaire returns from individuals and three from faculty members indicating an interest in working with their students in assisting local

community groups. Counting the planning group in, then, the Boston NETWORK was 60 strong!

Soliciting Community Groups

At the same time as efforts to recruit volunteers were going on, a similar thrust was being made to identify community groups who would be the recipients of the NETWORK's efforts. With the assistance of the United Community Services (UCS) and several community organization directories, some 200 organizations and groups were identified for an initial mailing.

Prior to the mailing, however, a procedure was worked out with the UCS for funneling community requests for assistance. Organizations and groups on the mailing list were to be given the phone number of the "VOLUNTEER Office" of UCS. A UCS representative would take the name and phone number of any caller and promise a return call from a NETWORK member shortly. One of the members of the planning group would then be contacted and assume responsibility for:

- clarifying the need or request with the community organization representative;
- screening the volunteer file for persons with background and/or skills seeming to match the needs of the requesting organization;
- contacting volunteers to elicit their interest and willingness to help;
- arranging for the initial meeting of the volunteer with the community group;
- evaluating the "match" in terms of accomplishment and volunteer performance.

Seemingly, then, everything was ready to go. A letter explaining how the NETWORK would operate and the services it would provide was drawn up by the planning group and mimeographed to be sent out to community groups. A news release to be sent out simultaneously with the mailing to all major newspapers in the metropolitan area was prepared. United Community Services had the office and home phone numbers of all members of the planning groups so that community requests could be rapidly handled. UCS, in fact, prepared a log book to keep track of requests. Members of the planning group each had, what was called, "Help Request" forms to assist in processing community solicitations. In short, from an organizational viewpoint, the Boston local of NBE was ready for action!

The First Five Months

On September 8, 1971 200 letters went out to a variety of organizations that ranged from Title I groups, service centers and PTA units to United Fund agencies, ethnic and racial organizations and community action agencies. On October 4 the planning group met to review and act on the requests to date. There were <u>none</u>. One reason given, which appeared technical but might have been of some importance, was that the UCS switchboard was not geared to handling the type of request that might come in, and since community groups were only given a phone

number (and not a name), some calls and callers might have inadvertently been "turned off" at the switchboard operator level.

But even granted this technical flaw, it was obvious to the planning group that something had gone wrong. Even "mid-course" corrections at the switchboard would not significantly change the fact that... we had flopped. Suggestions were made for additional mailings. Some planning group members suggested they were going to follow up on some "leads" with the inference that this would bring in some business. The meeting did not go well... the disappointment was great. At the meeting's conclusion no one wanted to set a date for another meeting. If some of the "leads" panned out and business picked up then the coordinator was directed to call another meeting. Unstated was the reverse corollary... without any additional activity -- the group would call the coordinator but the coordinator was not to call the group.

Between early October and early January one request made its way to the NETWORK files. It was a fairly straightforward solicitation for help in setting up a tutorial program. One of the planning group, using the NETWORK files, quickly found a volunteer to help with this request. The files, however, were growing yellow with age and non-use. The future, as the New Year began, was clear but bleak... without some help to bring the NETWORK volunteers to the attention of those who could use them, the NETWORK was a bankrupt operation.

In January, therefore, the coordinator began calling around to people he knew professionally and soliciting advice. Out of the welter of suggestions came one that appeared to make more sense than most. The NETWORK needed a broker - many brokers between itself and those it wished to serve. These brokers presumably knew the ways and language of the NETWORK's prospective clients yet could also communicate with offshoots from the establishment such as the NETWORK. Calls and letters went out to Title I directors, citizen's councils, federations or clusters of community schools, model cities, the Urban League and even such groups as the Associated Foundation of Boston and the Permanent Charities Foundation. These groups were given a "kit" of materials and all the information they needed in order to refer groups to the NETWORK.

Perhaps over time and with nurturance and care this strategy of working with intermediate broker groups would have worked. One information request actually did materialize but, otherwise,... silence. Sometimes, however, persistence pays off in unexpected ways. Such was the case with the NETWORK when the coordinator placed a call to an organization that called itself VITA... Volunteers for International Technical Assistance.

A New Life for the Network

VITA, with headquarters in Schenectady, New York is a worldwide, private, non-profit organization which provides volunteer professionals to assist individuals, groups and organizations who request technical assistance. VITA provides this assistance by assigning volunteers, who number well over 8,000 nationally, whose skills have been carefully matched to the needs of the requestor. Begun in 1960 by a group of GE engineers who believed developing countries were going to

need technical assistance, VITA was approached by the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1969 with the proposal that the organization expand its program to work also with domestic groups fighting proverty. Since that time VITA, with support from OEO, corporations and foundations, has developed over a million dollar program handling probably close to 30,000 world-wide requests.

VITA's domestice offices are located in Houston, San Francisco, Pittsburg, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles and Boston. The Boston office, in operation since 1969, has provided free professional services to over 200 community groups annually. These services have been provided to community action agencies, day-care centers, education programs, housing organizations, neighborhood service agencies and youth service groups. Examples of VITA Boston services in education include:

- providing long-range planning, proposal writing, public relations, and staff training assistance to Child's World, a Boston day-care center which offers employment to low income people.

- obtaining free professional services from architects and engineers in designing playground modules that require inexpensive materials and can easily be constructed by parents and other community residents.

- preventing the closing, by fire and safety inspectors, of Boston's Storefront Learning Center by working out a plan for correcting all violations at the lowest possible cost.

- securing the help of a language education volunteer to draft a bilingual educational proposal for a Massachusetts town.

The call put through to VITA by the NETWORK's Boston coordinator led to a discussion of the best way to activate the NETWORK. It soon became clear that while VITA could certainly act as a broker for requests made for research skills, there was even a better way to have the volunteer files put to use. Simply put -- turn the entire operation over to VITA! After discussing this with two members of the planning group, the coordinator decided in late January to do just this with two stipulations:

- that VITA honor the guarantees and assurances the NETWORK had given its volunteers concerning the use of their names;

- that VITA periodically provide the coordinator with reports on the use made and accomplishments of NETWORK volunteers.

In a sense, then, the NETWORK was being given a new lease on life. An activist, intervention agency <u>with clients</u> was going to do

what the planning group had wanted but was not able to do... transact business between volunteer researchers and community groups. Indeed, by the middle of March, less than a month and a half after VITA started using the NETWORK files, NETWORK volunteers were called upon:

- to assist a community school in program development and in planning for the use of the school building after hours.
- to provide information on pre-school programs.
- to assist an inner city parochial school with Title I negotiations in Boston.

In the months ahead former NETWORK volunteers may be expected to be called upon for help in:

- developing and evaluation reading programs.
- proposal writing and evaluation.
- designing and improving Upward Bound programs.
- remaking a "traditional" school into an "experimental" one.

Commentary The tale of the Short Life and Hard Times of the Boston NETWORK is, in a sense, a micro-drama within a larger morality play. Like many free schools and other volunteer associations the NETWORK was begun in the heat of liberal passion and social conscience only to cool and wither in the face of reality and indifference. Although planned and engineered with some skill the NETWORK was blind to its assumptions and ignorant about those whom it wished to serve. Operated on the left over time of professionals whose real interests were elsewhere, the NETWORK planners naively expected to make a significant impact. Suffering under the common middle-class delusion that it possessed something deeply cherished by lower class groups, the NETWORK planners were hurt when no group opted to accept their offering. The fact that VITA provided a happy end to the tale does not relieve the nagging suspicion that researchers, despite their claims to rational modes of inquiry, are as far removed from understanding other groups as those with less pretence or claim to rationality.

How could it have been any different? Perhaps, if the planning group had chosen to <u>involve itself</u> with a community group or limited number of groups rather than assuming the stance of an administrative and policy unit, the NETWORK might have had something substantive to report. Again, it is possible to speculate that had the NETWORK planners <u>created</u> a project (e.g. put together a directory of how to go after money, written especially for poorly-funded groups; conducted an independent assessment of a Title I project, prepared a booklet for use by community schools on how to evaluate reading programs, etc.) they

might have found some appreciative audiences. Finally, one can conjecture, had the planners sought wider involvement in the planning process itself from the research community and community groups that there might have been a different tale to tell.